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ABSTRACT

In an effort to obtain an accurate account of the evaluation processes used by learning assistance programs, a questionnaire was distributed to 231 institutions in the United States requesting information of the following types: type of program, population served, funding sources, evaluation rationale and methodology, information gained and problems encountered in evaluation, frequency of evaluation, and extent of revision after evaluation. The high return rate of more than three-fourths of the surveys reflected a serious concern for evaluation on the part of administrators and program directors. Furthermore, the results of the survey indicate that evaluation is an ongoing process and that its primary purpose is to improve the total program. Evaluation for the purposes of providing the staff with performance feedback and of determining student academic success received high ratings, while evaluation for the purpose of funding or to determine accreditation were rated as less important. (Tables of findings are included.) (HAI)

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# A NATIONAL SURVEY OF LEARNING ASSISTANCE EVALUATION: RATIONALE, TECHNIQUES, PROBLEMS

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Most practitioners in the area of college level reading and study skills would agree emphatically that the learning assistance movement has gained great momentum in recent years. Universities which once offered a course in reading and/or study skills improvement have expanded and supplemented this service. What has emerged is the learning assistance concept. Frank Christ (5) states that the learning assistance concept encompasses more than the reading and study skills course, "it includes the world of the learner, the environment in which and with which he must cope to remain in college and to graduate from college." (5:33) Devirian, Enwright, & Smith (9) in 1974, attempt to give definition to this evolving field throughout the nation. They report that at least 759 institutions in the U.S. have learning study skills programs[1] and 115 institutions indicate plans to develop a learning center (9).

With the increased demand for educational accountability, evaluation of learning assistance programs has gained great importance (7, 10, 11, 17, 21, 27). College level reading instruction has been evaluated as early as 1929 (24). However, since that time many studies have been reported in the professional literature which attempt to determine the effectiveness of reading and study

skills programs, but not the learning assistance concept per se (2, 12, 14, 15, 19, 24, 26, 27). Mostly these studies have been concerned with the evaluation of instruction, not the total program. Furthermore, they have been widely criticized for lack of adequate experimental design and control (3, 15, 20, 23, 24, 25, 27), inadequate and inappropriate criteria as measures of success (2, 19, 25, 27), ineffective measurement tools (2, 19, 25, 27), misuse of statistics in analyzing data (20, 23, 24, 25), unwarranted generalizations in reporting results (3, 20, 23, 25), lack of attention to affective variables as predictors of success (2, 19, 20, 24, 25), and failure to determine long-term effects of instruction (13). Typically, these researchers have used GPA, pre-post test scores, credit hour production, and attrition rate to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Of late, criticism of the studies has generated from the belief that evaluation of reading and study skills programs, especially those which have integrated the learning assistance concept, must be ongoing, formative, and cybernetic. Hence, the purpose of reading and study skills program evaluation is not to conduct empirical research, but rather to determine the extent to which a program achieves its objectives, meets the needs of the students which it serves, effectively trains its instructors, and appropriately revises ineffective and inefficient components of the total program (19, 22).

Devirian (7) addresses this issue in a paper presented at the seventh annual conference of the Western College Reading Association where she describes the systems approach to accountability in the Learning Assistance Center at California State University - Long

Beach. She explains:

> In terms of accountability being concerned with effectiveness and efficiency, a Learning Assistance Center is held accountable through this cybernetics approach to systems. This allows the LAC to be accountable not only to itself as a system and a program, but also to be accountable to its learners and learning facilitators, the campus it serves, its sponsoring agency, and to other Learning Assistance Centers.
>
> Improved data collection, analysis, and subsequent changes are required for improved accountability. (7:52)

A number of accounts appear in the literature which describe systems approaches to evaluate reading and study skills programs (1, 6, 7, 10, 16, 18, 20, 21, 28, 20). Discussion of these evaluation methodologies, employed when a systems approach is implemented, can be found in the literature to some extent; however, descriptions of the programs occur more frequently (4).

In 1973, Devirian (7) reveals that in the literature "little can be found that discusses data collection and analysis to derive accountability." (7:52) Currently, there remains to be a paucity of information regarding evaluation procedures and data collection and analysis. But, there is evidence that practioners who evaluate learning assistance programs are using more informal, ongoing methods to determine the effectiveness of the total program and its components.

In order to gain a more accurate account of the status of evaluation of the learning assistance program concept and its components, a national survey was undertaken in 1977. Although more than fifty surveys of learning skills centers at the state and national level have been reported (8) none of them dealt specifically with evaluation.

## Procedure

The survey instrument of this study consisted of twenty-seven questions on type of program, population served, funding sources, evaluation rationale and methodology, information gained and problems encountered in evaluation, frequency of evaluation, importance of evaluation of program components, and the extent of revision after evaluation. The questionnaire was mailed to 231 directors of learning assistance programs in the U.S. The selection of program directors was not random, but an attempt was made to obtain a representative sample within four regions of the U.S. as defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Since the exact number of learning assistance programs is not available, the number of survey instruments sent to each region was based on an approximation of the numbers of programs in each region.

A total of 181 (78%) of the questionnaires were completed and returned. The results were processed on an IBM computer 360, and the Statistical Package for Social Science Version H was used in processing the data. Numbers and frequency of responses were determined for each survey item, and data accumulated from several pertinent questions were cross tabulated. Additionally, the data were categorized according to region, type and level of institution, and size of program. Responses from all questions were cross-tabulated within these categories.

## Results

Following is a preliminary report of some of the data collected. Analysis will be made of the additional data and reported at a later time.[2]

Table I

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

| Variables | Responses: Frequency (Percentages) | |
|---|---|---|
| **Regional** | | |
| West: Ak., Ariz., Calif., Colo., Hi., Id., Mont., Neb., Nev., N. Mex., Okla., Oreg., Tex., Ut., Wash., Wyo. | 54 | ( 29.8) |
| Central: Ill., Ind., Ia., Kans., Mich., Minn., Mo., N. Dak., Oh., S. Dak., Wis., | 52 | ( 28.7) |
| Northeast: Conn., Del., Me., Md., Mass., N.H., N.J., N.Y., Pa., R.I., Vt., Wash. D.C. | 38 | ( 21.0) |
| South: Ala., Ark., Fla., Ga., Ky., La., Miss., N.C., S.C., Tenn., Va., W. Va. | 37 | ( 20.4) |
| Total | 181 | ( 99.9) |
| **Level of Institution** | | |
| 4 year | 106 | ( 58.6) |
| 2 year | 75 | ( 41.4) |
| Total | 181 | (100.0) |
| **Type of Institution** | | |
| Public | 144 | ( 79.6) |
| Private | 37 | ( 20.4) |
| Total | 181 | (100.0) |
| **Type of Client Served Most Frequently** | | |
| Incoming Freshmen | 83 | ( 45.9) |
| Lower Classmen | 46 | ( 25.4) |
| EOP/Special Admits | 12 | ( 6.6) |
| Upper Classmen | 2 | ( 1.1) |
| Other | 38 | ( 21.0) |
| Total | 181 | (100.0) |
| **Admission Policy** | | |
| Open | 108 | ( 59.7) |
| Closed | 68 | ( 37.6) |
| Total | 176 | ( 97.3) |
| **Credit Offered** | | |
| Yes | 62 | ( 34.3) |
| Sometimes | 64 | ( 35.4) |
| No | 54 | ( 29.8) |
| Total | 180 | ( 99.5) |

Table I

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

(continued)

| Highest Priority Program Function | | |
|---|---|---|
| Learning Skills* | 61 | ( 33.7) |
| Reading Skills | 50 | ( 27.6) |
| Tutorial | 25 | ( 13.8) |
| Writing Skills | 6 | ( 3.3) |
| Other | 38 | ( 21.0) |
| Total | 180 | ( 99.4) |

* includes reading and study skills

Table II

EVALUATION RATIONALE

| Variables | Responses: Frequency (Percentages) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Priority Rankings | | | | Total |
| | 1 (High) | 2 | 3 | 4 (Low) | |
| To Improve the Total Program | 140 ( 85.4) | 22 ( 13.4) | 2 ( 1.2) | 0 | 164 (100.0) |
| To Give Program Staff Performance Feedback | 28 ( 18.3) | 88 ( 57.5) | 35 ( 22.9) | 2 ( 1.5) | 153 (100.2) |
| To Retain and/or Increase Funding | 17 ( 12.9) | 27 ( 20.5) | 74 ( 56.1) | 14 ( 10.6) | 132 (100.1) |
| To Determine Accreditation | 1 ( 1.0) | 3 ( 3.1) | 13 ( 13.3) | 81 ( 82.7) | 98 (100.1) |

Table III

IMPORTANCE OF EVALUATING PROGRAM COMPONENTS

| Variables | Responses: Frequency (Percentages) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Very Important | Somewhat Important | Not Important | Total |
| Total Program Effectiveness | 157 ( 93.5) | 10 ( 6.0) | 1 ( 0.6) | 168 (100.1) |
| Management of Program | 110 ( 66.3) | 50 ( 30.1) | 3 ( 1.8) | 163 ( 98.2) |
| Communication Among Staff | 110 ( 66.7) | 35 ( 21.2) | 10 ( 6.1) | 155 ( 94.0) |
| Training of Staff | 102 ( 62.2) | 40 ( 24.4) | 8 ( 4.9) | 150 ( 91.5) |
| Materials Used | 91 ( 54.8) | 66 ( 39.8) | 6 ( 3.6) | 163 ( 98.2) |
| Publicity | 55 ( 33.5) | 75 ( 45.7) | 20 ( 12.2) | 150 ( 91.4) |

Table IV

METHODS USED TO EVALUATE PROGRAM

| Variables | Responses: Frequency (Percentages) | |
|---|---|---|
| Methods | | |
| User Questionnaire | 117 | ( 71.3) |
| Center Usage | 103 | ( 62.8) |
| Standardized Tests | 103 | ( 62.8) |
| Analyses of User GPA | 75 | ( 45.7) |
| User Attrition | 59 | ( 36.0) |
| Campus Administration Evaluation | 55 | ( 33.5) |
| Other | 41 | ( 25.0) |
| Total Number of Responses | 553* | (337.2)* |
| Total Number of Individuals Responding | 164 | |

*Respondents may have checked more than one variable for this item.

Table IV

METHODS USED TO EVALUATE PROGRAM

(continued)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Methods Which Provide Most Information** | | |
| User Questionnaire | 74 | ( 44.8) |
| Center Usage | 70 | ( 42.4) |
| Standardized Tests | 48 | ( 29.1) |
| Analyses of User GPA | 46 | ( 27.9) |
| User Attrition | 39 | ( 23.6) |
| Campus Administration Evaluation | 16 | ( 9.7) |
| Other | 26 | ( 15.8) |
| Total Number of Responses | 319* | (193.3) |
| Total Number of Individuals responding | 165 | |
| **Informal Methods** | | |
| Student Verbal Comments | 131 | ( 79.4) |
| Unstructured Student Written Evaluation | 95 | ( 57.6) |
| Program Produced Evaluation Forms | 101 | ( 61.2) |
| Other | 30 | ( 18.2) |
| Total Number of Responses | 357* | (216.4) |
| Total Number of Individuals Responding | 165 | |

*Respondents may have checked more than one variable for these items.

Table V

DETERMINATION OF STUDENT ACADEMIC SUCCESS: LONG TERM

| Variables | Responses: | Frequency (Percentages) |
|---|---|---|
| **Methods** | | |
| Follow-up Studies | 94 | ( 55.6) |
| Analyses of Ability to Perform in Other Courses | 42 | ( 24.9) |
| Not Yet Determined* | 52 | ( 30.8) |
| Not Objective of Program | 6 | ( 3.6) |
| Other | 24 | ( 14.2) |
| Total Number of Responses | 218* | (129.0) |
| Total Number of Individuals Responding | 169 | |
| ***Plans to Determine Academic Success** | | |
| Yes | 45 | ( 73.8) |
| No | 16 | ( 26.2) |
| Total | 61 | (100.0) |

*Respondents may have checked more than one variable for this item.

Table VI

DETERMINATION OF IMPROVED LEARNING SKILLS: PROGRAM TERMINATION

| Variables | Responses: Frequency (Percentages) | |
|---|---|---|
| Students Demonstrate Improvement During Course | 99 | ( 58.9) |
| Student Testamonials | 99 | ( 58.9) |
| Never Absolutely Determined | 63 | ( 37.3) |
| Other | 24 | ( 14.3) |
| Total Number of Responses | 285* | (169.6) |
| Total Number of Individuals Responding | 168 | |

*Respondents may have checked more than one variable for this item.

## Discussion

The extremely high percentage of return (78%) of this survey is a clear indication that learning assistance program directors are seriously concerned with evaluation. Furthermore, the results of the survey indicate strongly that the evaluation is ongoing, and its purpose is largely to facilitate the maintenance of efficient and effective programs which assist students in succeeding in college.

Overwhelmingly the most important reason for evaluation is to improve the total program, which is followed by providing staff with performance feedback. Evaluation for the purpose of funding or determining accreditation appear to be less important. In terms of evaluating components of the program, respondents most frequently indicated that it is very important to assess total program effectiveness, program management, materials used in the program, and communication and training of staff. Although evaluation of publicity of the program was very important for some, generally it is not as important as the other components or the total program.

An objective of the majority of programs surveyed is to assist students in developing skills which will enable them to succeed in college. The achievement of this objective is most often determined by follow-up studies and research conducted in other courses in which the students are enrolled. Additionally, most programs which have not yet evaluated the accomplishment of this objective intend to conduct some type of follow-up study.

While most respondents felt that they could demonstrate that students' improved learning skills are a direct result of instruction offered through the program, a substantial number (22.1%) believe that this "is never absolutely determined." The word "absolutely" was troublesome for some respondents; in the context of statistics, findings which are absolute are non-existent.

It is also interesting to note the methods which are most often used to evaluate a total program: center usage, user questionnaires, and standardized tests, provide the most information to practitioners. It is not surprising that many programs use GPA analyses, attrition rate, and testing to evaluate, but there is considerable evidence to demonstrate that evaluation design is becoming less formal. Practitioners seem to employ methods which encourage student assessment of the value of the total program, the instruction, the materials, and the transferability to other academic situations. Most programs encourage informal feedback from students through oral or written testamonials, questionnaires, or the familiar suggestion box technique. Another valuable item for which data is collected is the number of referrals by faculty or students who have participated in the program.

This survey did not ask for specific information on experimental studies which are being conducted in evaluation. Although the prominent use of follow-up studies to determine "long-term effects" of a learning assistance program is repeatedly demonstrated in this survey, the nature of these studies is only partially revealed when respondents were asked to describe plans to "determine academic success." In light of the extensive criticism of the experimental studies reported in the literature, further research to define trends of experimental designs used to evaluate students increased ability to succeed in college is highly recommended.

Responses in categories labeled "other" frequently reveal that the hiring of outside consultants is apparently becoming widely practiced in evaluation of learning assistance programs. Perhaps this trend is a reflection of criticism in the past which related to the reluctance of evaluators to be objective in the analysis of data. The widespread acceptance of this practice points to the high degree of importance that is placed upon evaluation and accountability. If learning assistant practitioners are willing to spend money on evaluation, then it follows that it is indeed an integral force in the movement of the learning assistance concept.

In the area of evaluation of learning assistance programs, we are truly "charting our course." Evaluation is certainly in the formative stage, and hopefully it will remain there. As we continue to assess our work as professionals, our instructional relationships with students, our supervisory roles with staff, and our communication skills with colleagues; and as we make

changes in our programs that will enhance the delivery, acceptance, and integration of the learning assistance concept, then, we will be closer to accountability. Ideally, our evaluation methodology will change as learning assistance programs, objectives, and clients change. We will always need more research, more surveys, and more literature inputs to "chart our course" in evaluation, to evaluate how we evaluate.

Footnotes

1 The authors use the term learning program generically to describe centers or programs "which provide instruction in reading, study skills, or general academic assistance to enable students to learn more in less time with greater ease." (9:67) For the purpose of this paper, the term learning assistance program will be used in this sense.

2 Additional information is available from the author upon request.

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